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The Pleasure of Resistance: *Jouissance* and Reconceiving "Misbehavior"

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THE PLEASURE OF RESISTANCE: *JOUISSANCE* AND RECONCEIVING "MISBEHAVIOR"

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What I find most compelling about Steve Schultz's paper, written more than fifteen years ago, is his impulse to "resist" the normalizing, standardizing, and objectifying strains in the psychological discourses that dominated the conversation on education then, and continue, with even greater force, to shape it today. Such an impulse reflects a desire to honor students' subjectivity, to understand the contingency and specificity of the inter-subjective world in classrooms, and to revel in the pleasurable and frightening sensual messiness—the *jouissance*, if you will—of life in schools. It is that *jouissance* that psychological discourses, especially those of developmental and cognitive psychology, drain out or cast beyond the pale. And it is also progressive education's privileging of a particular kind of reason and rationality as a way to contain that *jouissance* that Steve, I would speculate, was also challenging, although in language paradoxically anchored in modernist approaches to reason and rationality.

In his essay, Steve analyzed the behavior of specific children at school. In the first anecdote presented, Leona, a toddler, is climbing back up a slide the wrong way, while another child waits to slide down. Leona appears to be about to pinch the child for getting in her way, and then, when her teachers tell her to get down and to stop hitting, she seems to refuse the directions. In a second anecdote, a group of children seem, by almost prearranged plan, to run in a circle in the classroom. They refuse to stop even though the teachers demand a halt to the wild circling. In yet another anecdote, the children are waiting for an activity to begin, and when it does not, they start to bang on the table in unison, much as hungry prisoners are portrayed doing in films when they want food.

Framing his analysis of these children's behavior in terms of resistance theory, a theory initially elaborated by Paul Willis (1977), Steve saw in the children's actions a nascent political activism. A response to the critique of reproduction theory as leading to despair and a view of people as passive victims, resistance theory had tried to bring subjectivity back into the neo-Marxist analysis of education (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Taubman, 1994). It did this by interpreting students' transgressions in school as acts of resistance to the bleak authoritarianism and irrelevance of schooling. Rather than positioning students as products of oppressive systems, the way reproduction theory did, Willis and other resistance theorists attributed agency to

the students. Thus, resistance theory offered Steve and other progressive educators a way to think about children's behavior that contextualized that behavior within a socioeconomic system, capitalism, but did not reduce that behavior to the conditioned responses of passive victims. Resistance theory seemed to rescue child-centered pedagogy from its de-politicized Romanticism and return a politicized subjectivity and agency to children.

Resistance theory, however, soon came under attack for its simplistic reading of student behavior that, in fact, was part of and reproduced the status quo. Thus, for example, while adolescent boys' or girls' refusal to do homework or follow teachers' instructions could be read as conscious resistance, it could also be read as sustaining those students' own position in both the school system and the larger social world. Thus, it had the potential to increase surveillance and to generate even more meaningless work. Furthermore, resistance theory tended to reduce a student's subjectivity to that of a rational, incipient, political activist; and while young children may have a strong sense of fairness and loyalty, and while they may be capable of solidarity, they also subjectivize those feelings and capacities.

While I applaud what I am reading as the implicit impulse on Steve's part to broaden the discourse in early childhood education, I think resistance theory is not particularly helpful, because it does not take into account the complexity of subjectivity and desire, nor does it offer as many alternative ways of responding to and understanding life in the classroom as Steve may have yearned for.

I would suggest that Lacanian psychoanalysis, and in particular Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, offer an alternative way to read the vignettes that Steve presents. *Jouissance* is a word associated, of course, with the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who used it in multiple ways over the course of his teachings. I want to mention just some of the meanings attached to this word. In my brief overview of the meanings of the term, I have relied on Dylan Evans's *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1997) and Danny Nobus's *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1999).

First, *jouissance* is associated with orgasm, but it cannot be reduced to that, because it is not synonymous with sexual pleasure, in particular, or even pleasure in general. In fact, *jouissance*, as Lacan defines it, is an excess of pleasure or an excess that is beyond pleasure. If anything, pleasure serves as a limit on *jouissance*. In this sense, pleasure is to *jouissance* as religion is to spirituality, or as genital sex is to eroticism.

Second, *jouissance* designates a kind of ecstasy tied to loss of control and rational consciousness, and secondarily to violence, either emotional or physical. Such ecstasy can result from intense suffering—think of the mortification of the saints—or from surrender to the thrill of risk, a minor example being all those amusement park rides that terrify. In this sense, there is a resonance with Edmund Burke's idea of the sublime that stops language and desire, as it inspires terror, dread, and awe.

Third, Lacan defines *jouissance* as the "paradoxical satisfaction that is found in pursuing an eternally unsatisfied desire" (Nobus, p.5). It is this meaning that resonates with the pleasure derived from repetition.

Fourth, *jouissance* can designate the pleasure that results from a transgressive act because of its transgressiveness. It is in this sense that the degree of pleasure is in direct relation to the price one must pay for it. Thus, the pleasure of the transgressive act is proportional to the punishment one risks.

Fifth, in his later writings, Lacan conceives of *jouissance* as being beyond the pleasure principle. In other words, the normal or reasonable calculations of pleasure and pain are disregarded. Accepting suffering and even death, and the pursuit of an unsatisfied desire without regard for one's own safety, places that pursuit in the ethical domain. The story of Antigone is the primary example of such ethical behavior.

Sixth, Lacan speaks in his later writing of the *jouissance* trapped in the symptom. He called this a *sinthome*, and defined it as a kernel of enjoyment immune to analytic methods. It constitutes a resistance that cannot be overcome, for the analysand derives too much unconscious pleasure from the symptom. In fact the symptom is not only filled with *jouissance*, but provides a unique organization of that analysand's *jouissance*. Thus, for example, not only does the analysand who persists in apparently self-defeating or self-destructive behavior or thoughts find pleasure in this pursuit, but the form of that pursuit organizes that analysand's more general relation to *jouissance*.

Finally, *jouissance* is bodily. It is a force beyond language, although it may offer enjoyment in pursuing meaning in language. There is something physical about jouissance, and while the hydraulic metaphors that accompany Lacan's use of the term seem as dated as those that accompany Freud's use of term *libido*, it may be premature in this age of chemical origins of moods and behaviors and brain waves and energy fields to dismiss such metaphors.

What I want to emphasize about *jouissance* is its uncontrollability. It resists, subverts, and eludes control or domestication. While it may need to be sacrifice—and Lacan would be the first to say that civilization is built on that sacrifice—it offers us an alternative way to understand, to appreciate, and to engage with one another, no matter how old we are.

I believe, for example, that Steve was struggling to find a way to honor students' subjectivity and to bring *jouissance* into the conversation about early childhood education. My sense is that this might be why Steve turned to resistance theory in the late 1980's. Ironically, that turn to resistance theory sustained a particular kind of appropriation of the students' subjectivity. In other words, he projected into these children a pre-political consciousness, placed on a developmental trajectory that culminated in political activism. At no point were the children asked why they disobeyed their teachers, or why they did what they did.

While I was thinking about my response to Steve's paper, I asked my four-year-old daughter and her friend why they disobey their teachers, and why they, like

Leona in Steve's anecdote, might, as they were going down a slide, stop midway, turn around and climb back up, even though another child was waiting at the top. Both my daughter and her friend said they would climb back up the slide so they could keep going down again and again. My daughter said she would disobey a teacher sometimes so she could a get time out because she needed to be alone, away from the group. And, she added, sometimes the teacher was wrong. Her friend said she would disobey because it was "scary fun" and so she could get a time out. Then her friends would be nice to her because they would be "sad for her." Later, I asked another of my daughter's friends why he disobeyed his teachers. Nicky said he disobeyed because he hated school and he was angry with the teachers that he had to be there.

Although they had elaborate explanations for doing what they did, none of them, except perhaps Nicky, were "resisting" in any pre-political sense; and if he were, one can already see how his resistance might function to reproduce his further entrapment in more repressive structures such as the labeling system of special needs. If we read these three children's responses or behaviors in terms of *jouissance*, however, a different picture emerges than the one conjured by resistance theory. We can read the children's explanations for their behavior in terms of the pleasure of repetition, the thrill of transgression, the joy of feeling sorry for oneself, the sense of solitariness and pursuing an unsatisfied desire to the point of exclusion from community.

I want to argue, then, for an appreciation of the *jouissance* in schools. Such an appreciation would work against the impulse to domesticate, to control or to appropriate the subjectivities of students and children.

I close by looking at a recent piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, written by Michael Berube, entitled "Standards of Reason in the Classroom." In this essay Berbube describes an undergraduate literature class in which a "large white" (B8) male student increasingly resisted or transgressed the etiquette of classroom discussion. The student not only voiced the rightwing opinions we have become accustomed to hearing on talk radio, but also claimed he was silenced by the hegemonic political correctness of liberal and radical voices in the class. Berube writes:

> *John spoke up often, sometimes loudly, sometimes out of turn. He had begun to conceive of himself as the only countervailing conservative voice in a classroom full of liberal-left thinkalikes…Often he was obstreperous and out of bounds. (B8).*

Berube chose not to control him, or "teach him manners," or shut him up, because he didn't want to "contribute to John's growing sense of lonely opposition" (B8). The denouement came when John defended the internment of the Japanese during WWII and the possible internment of Muslims today. At that point Berube felt compelled to speak to John, almost solicitously, he says, as if to say, "You under-

stand so little about how some of your remarks might be taken by members of racial minorities, and yet you say so much about them, you could be in for some rough times" (B10).

Berube concludes:

> *To all such students—indeed to all students, those with disabilities and those without—I try to apply the standard of disability law: I make reasonable accommodations for them. The challenge, though, lies in making reasonable accommodations for students whose standards of "reasonableness" are significantly different than yours. Few aspects of teaching are so difficult—and I think, so rarely acknowledged by people who don't teach for a living. (B10*

As I finished Berube's article, I kept thinking of Steve's call for resistance. After all, John was resisting, transgressing several norms, but he was not engaged in the kind of resistance critical pedagogues have in mind. How might Steve have understood such resistance? And I kept thinking of those early childhood educators who might, if John were a child, tell him to use his words more carefully, or those developmentalists who might soothe their own anxiety about loss of control by placing John just a little behind on a developmental continuum, or those cognitivists who might imagine that a meta-discourse on racism would convince John of his uncritical thinking, as if more language or reason or maturation would lead to John's enlightenment or progress. And I thought of Lacan's elaboration of *jouissance*, for indeed John may well have fathomed himself as Antigone, or been engaged in a repetition compulsion, or perhaps he was pursuing the joy of transgression. Seeing him in this light might have offered Berube other alternatives to the liberal reasoning that seems both ineffectual and patronizing.

Confronted with behavior or attitudes that fall beyond the norm or that appear resistant or transgressive, I think we need to consider several possible actions.

First, we could appreciate the *jouissance* of the resistance or the transgression. Reading the resistance or transgression in this way allows us to speculate about the various possibilities for understanding and responding, possibilities enumerated above. Second, we could put the resistance or transgression into some curricular register, for example the aesthetic, that allows for a fuller elaboration of feelings, associations, movements, and imaginings. By placing the resistance or transgression in this register, we allow for it to be opened up, explored, and expressed in ways that have more explicit intentionality. The autonomy and power in the resistance can be preserved, but they can also be expressed more creatively and consciously. Third, we can explicitly acknowledge our own views, and if they are held as truths, however contingent, not resort to manipulation through a kind of "reasonable reason" that feels patronizing and controlling to me. Rather, we can hold fast to our own ethical *jouissance*. Finally, we can refrain from the passive aggressive move of pathologizing stu-

dents by placing their subjectivity on some a priori psychological trajectory of cognitive or emotional development.

In taking such steps, we honor the subjectivity of our students, acknowledge the intersubjective world of the classroom, allow for a more intentional expression of political and creative dissent, and offer our students and ourselves opportunities to investigate the knots, the pressures, the tensions, the resistances, the desires, and the *jouissance* that constitute life in schools.

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